

Hand trauma

Hand infections

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Hand infection

An infection of the hand can start from something small – such as a scratch, minor wound, or nail biting. It can start as an area that is a little sore and red, and may progress to become swollen, or can develop a collection of pus. Infections can happen in different ways depending on where in your hand is affected.

If left untreated, infection in the hand can lead to permanent damage and not being able to use the affected part of your hand. You would also be at risk of the infection spreading to the rest of your hand and other areas of your body, which could make you unwell.

How will you treat my hand infection?

If we catch a hand infection at an early stage, we can sometimes treat it with antibiotics alone. If your hand infection is severe we can't treat it with antibiotics alone and you will need surgery. If your hand infection involves a collection of pus, you will need surgery to remove the pus.

Surgery for hand infections usually involves making a cut to open the infected area and washing it carefully. The details of the surgery including where the cut will be made, will be explained to you by the surgical team, as this will depend on the precise area affected. If there is any pus we will physically remove it as it cannot be treated with antibiotics.

Usually we will do a review (inspection) of the wound at 24 to 48 hours after the operation, as we might need to do a second procedure for further washout if there are any ongoing signs of infection. You might need to stay at the hospital between the procedures depending on how severe your infection is, for observation and antibiotics through a drip. The surgical team will explain whether you need admission following a review of your infection.

The surgical cuts to washout an infection are not usually closed with stitches. This is to avoid a closed, warm moist environment, which would be an ideal environment for bacteria to grow and promote further infection. We will put dressings on the cuts to help them heal. You will usually have the dressings for two to four weeks.

How soon will my surgery be?

We will usually be able to do your surgery within 24 to 48 hours after we first see you at the hospital. Hand infection surgery is an emergency surgery, which means we can book your surgery in quickly. This also means that the time or day of your surgery might be changed at short notice if there is another emergency surgery that needs to happen first.

Will I need to be asleep for the surgery?

Whether you need to be asleep (general anaesthetic) or not depends on where in your hand the infection is. If you don't need to be asleep for the procedure, we will use local anaesthetic (numbing injections) to numb the area so you don't feel pain during the surgery.

You might be:

- awake with an injection to numb the area (local anaesthetic)
- awake with an injection in your armpit or around the collar bone to numb your whole arm (regional anaesthetic)
- asleep (general anaesthetic)

As a team we (surgeons and anaesthetic doctors) will discuss with you which type of anaesthetics are suitable. This is based on several factors including the duration of your operation, your general health, whether you have someone to take you home and look after you on the day of surgery, and your preferences. We will make a decision together with you about which type of anaesthetic you will have.

How to prepare for your surgery

Fasting before your operation

For a severe hand infection, you will need to stay at the hospital from when we first assess you, as you will need antibiotics through a drip in your arm.

Depending on where in your hand the infection is, if the infection is not severe you may be able to have the procedure to wash out the infection under local anaesthetic (numbing injections). If this is the case, you will not need to fast before your surgery.

If you have a severe hand infection you will need surgery under a general or regional anaesthetic (while you're asleep or your whole arm is numb) you will need to fast before your procedure.

Please make sure you:

- do not eat anything after 2 am on the morning of your surgery (only plain water after this time)
- do not drink anything after 6 am on the morning of your surgery, except for a small sip of water to take any regular tablets
- do not have any chewing gum after 6 am on the morning of your surgery

Fasting before your surgery improves the safety of general anaesthetic, if you do not follow these rules, your procedure is likely to be delayed or moved to another day.

If you take regular medications, our team tell you if you need to stop them before your surgery. If you're not sure, please ask us.

On the day

Arriving for your operation

Day surgery:

Adults – We will ring you the day before your surgery. Please follow the instructions we give you in this phone call about where to go. Usually this is either the Surgical Admissions Lounge on level 4 in the QEQM building or Theatres on level 4 in the Paterson building at St Mary's Hospital.

Children – Please go to the children's ward (usually this will be either Great Western Ward or Westway Ward). Normally we will call to confirm where to go the day before surgery. It will be on level 6 in the QEQM building.



West Way and Great Western Wards
– Level 6 QEQM



Paterson Building



Theatres Admissions Lounge on Level 4 of QEQM



Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (QEQM) Building

If you are coming for your procedure as a day case (you're not staying overnight at the hospital), please make sure you arrive on time. Usually, we will ask you to arrive at 7.30am, but sometimes we might ask you to arrive later, if your surgery is planned to be in the afternoon.

Before your operation the surgical team will complete a consent form with you. We will explain why the operation is important, the risks of the surgery, alternatives to surgery including no surgery, and answer any questions you have about the operation.

As we mentioned above, surgery to treat a hand infection is an emergency surgery, which means we can book your surgery in quickly, but this does mean that if there is another urgent procedure we might have to change the time of your procedure.

Before your operation

On the ward, you will change into a hospital gown, and the nurse will take you to the operating theatre where the procedure will happen.

Children and adults with cognitive difficulties can take a relative, carer or friend with them to the operating theatre for their anaesthetic, however the accompanying person will not be able to stay for the operation. They will however be able to meet them once the operation is finished in the recovery area.

If you are having local anaesthetic, the surgeon will give you the numbing injections in the operating theatre. This will be a bit uncomfortable but will go numb within a few minutes, making the operation pain free.

If you are having a general or regional anaesthetic, this will be done by the anaesthetic doctor. This may include medications given as an injection, breathed in, or a combination of both. The

anaesthetic doctors will explain more about this. After the surgery, you will go to the recovery room for a short period before going back to the ward or going home.

For both approaches, we will ask you to confirm your name, date of birth, and the procedure you are having before giving you the anaesthetic.

After the operation

If you have had a general anaesthetic, the surgical team will come to see you on the ward to explain how the procedure went. You will need someone to collect you from the hospital after the procedure. This can be a family member, partner, or friend. You will need someone to stay with you for the first night after the operation. This is in case you have any problems that mean you need to come back to the hospital, such as bleeding or pain that is not controlled with painkillers.

If you are having a local anaesthetic (numbing injections), the team will explain how the procedure went while you are in the operating theatre. You will not need someone to stay with you for the first night after the operation.

We will give you information about how to look after your hand, including whether you will need another surgery and / or whether you will need to stay at the hospital. At this point we will only be able to give you an estimate of how long you will need to stay, because this will depend on how your infection progresses, so it may change.

Once you are safe to be discharged, you can go home with usually a week of tablet antibiotics to complete and instructions on how to look after your hand. Please note you should not drive yourself home and we advise you not to take public transport home.

You will be given an appointment to see the plastics dressing clinic team usually within two to three days, and depending on your infection an appointment may also be made to see the hand therapy team within one week after your procedure.

Recovery

How long will I need to stay in hospital for?

How long you need to stay in hospital depends on how quickly your infection improves.

You might need to stay in hospital from when you first arrive so that we can give you antibiotics. We will give you the antibiotics through a drip into your arm. After you have surgery, you might need more antibiotics and a review of the infected area of your hand.

If the affected area looks healthy, we'll give you tablet antibiotics and discharge you. If the area still looks infected, we will need to do another washout procedure.

Will I need a splint after my surgery?

Usually you will have a bulky dressing to protect the area, but not a splint. If the infection has damaged tendons that we need to repair, you will need a splint. If the infection has damaged structures such as tendons, or you do need a splint, we will explain more about this.

When will my hand function return to normal?

Wound healing takes about two to four weeks once the infection has been cleared.

Hands tend to become stiff if not used, therefore hand physiotherapy (also called hand therapy) is vital for restoring function following surgery. The first three weeks are particularly important for your hand function returning. There is a chance that your hand might not completely return to how it was before and you might have some stiffness long term.

How long will I need to see the hand therapy team for after my surgery?

You will see the plastics dressings clinic team and the hand therapist team within a week after your operation. You will most likely need to carry on seeing them for at least a month. How long you see them for depends on your injury and your recovery and you will be advised about need for further review when you are seen in the clinic.

How much time will I need to rest from work/school after my surgery?

This depends on what your job is and if you can make adjustments to it while you're recovering.

School – you can go back to school the next day with a protective dressing. You'll need to talk to your school because you'll need to stop sports, playing musical instruments and other practical activities for two to four weeks (until your wound has healed).

Manual work – you can return to work with light duties the following day, but no heavy manual work using the injured hand for two to four weeks (until the wound has healed).

Desk work – you can return to work the following day with a protective bulky dressing. You will need adjustments for two to four weeks, such as not using the injured hand for manual tasks, but you may be able to do light tasks such as typing.

We can give you a fit note (also known as a sick note) for your employer.

When can I return to normal activities/hobbies?

Once the wound has healed (about two to four weeks), it will be safe for you to return to normal activities and hobbies. When you go back to normal activities will depend on your symptoms and pain.

We advise that you don't drive while your injury is healing. This is because you might not be able to safely control your vehicle without making your injury worse, for example during an emergency stop. However, you should speak to the DVLA and your insurance company for more advice about this.

Is there anything I can do to improve the healing and recovery process?

- keep your hand elevated (raised up) to reduce swelling – we will give you a sling for this

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- finish the antibiotics you are given as per the instructions
 - follow your hand therapist's instructions for how to move your hand to prevent stiffness
 - use painkillers if you need them.
 - do not smoke or vape – nicotine makes it harder for your body to heal!

Useful contact details

Plastics dressings clinic team: imperial.smhplasticscns@nhs.net, 07833725706

Hand therapy team: imperial.handtherapyimperial@nhs.net

These email inboxes and this phone number are monitored Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm, and one of our team will reply to you as soon as possible.

For any emergency concerns (for example infection or unmanageable pain): please go to St Mary's A&E where you will be assessed by the on-call plastic surgery team. Or call 111, speak to your GP or local A&E.

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team: imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

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